

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



MEDIA ADVISORY

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International Star Yo-Yo Ma Highlights Hearing on How Visa Policy Affects Art, Commerce, and Innovation

*Chairman Davis to Examine State Department Challenges
In Balancing Security, Openness in U.S. Visa Policy*

What: Government Reform Committee Oversight Hearing,
“The Impact of Visa Processing Delays on the Arts, Education, and
American Innovation”

When: TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2006, 10:00 A.M.

Where: ROOM 2154, RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Background: Granting – or not granting – a visa to a foreign citizen seeking to travel to the United States is, in many ways, our nation’s first line of defense in protecting the homeland against the threat of terrorism

Each of the September 11th terrorists, for example, had at some point been vetted through a U.S. consulate overseas. Consequently, the U.S. Government went to great lengths to secure the visa process against transnational terrorism. This effort, however, has placed tremendous strains on the application review process. Applicants for non-immigrant visas (NIVs) to the United States now face daunting waits just to get an interview that may or may not result in their receiving a visa.

In India, for example, applicants can wait months for an interview – over 160 days is the average wait time at two (Chennai and Mumbai) of India’s four U.S. consulates.

The consequences of long visa delays are multiple and invariably negative for the United States. Economically, the delays harm U.S. businesses that need to bring foreign personnel to the United States for meetings or events. The U.S. travel and tourism industry is also negatively affected, as many would-be tourists are no doubt deterred from visiting the U.S. due to long wait times. American universities, which thrive on attracting the best and brightest students from around the world, are also affected.

And world famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma will testify about how delays in visa processing hurt the arts community. Many performing arts and cultural venues have had to cancel performances and events when international artists have been unable to obtain a visa in time.

There are also less tangible, long-term impacts on the U.S. image abroad. The United States has built its reputation around its character as an open society, powering a dynamic economy. An inefficient visa system, therefore, poses a very real threat to our national security.

Under Secretary Rice, the Department has undertaken a major rebalancing of its human resources, from a legacy Cold War posture to one that adapts to new diplomatic realities, such as an increasingly influential Asia and the Global War on Terrorism. When announcing this Transformational Diplomacy Initiative (TDI), the Secretary highlighted the fact that the Department currently has about the same number of employees in Germany, a country of 82 million people, as it does in India, a country of over one billion people. However, consular operations were not mentioned in the literature released about TDI, and although some of its initiatives on Foreign Service training will no doubt benefit consular operations, it is important to ensure that global rebalancing of Department resources takes the challenges facing Consular Affairs into account.

Witnesses:

Panel I

Tony Edson, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State
Jess T. Ford, Director, International Affairs and Trade, U.S. Government Accountability Office

Panel II

Yo-Yo Ma, Artistic Director, The Silk Road Project, Inc.

accompanied by

Sandra L. Gibson, President and CEO, Association of Performing Arts Presenters
Dennis J. Slater, President, Association of Equipment Manufacturers
Kevin Schofield, General Manager, Strategy and Communications, Microsoft Research
Elizabeth C. Dickson, Advisor, Immigration Services, Ingersoll-Rand Company and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

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